

Our Retreating Native Orchids

by Carlyle A. Luer

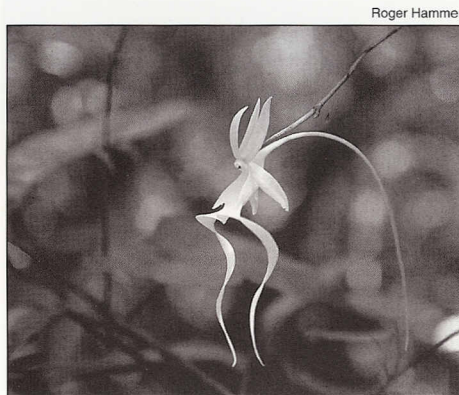
In 1955, when we built our home in a patch of woods which at that time was south of the town of Sarasota, I became interested in all the strange vegetation. It was strange to my wife and me because we had grown up in Illinois. One of the herbs that grew in the shaded leaf litter had soft, glossy, almost succulent leaves. Although I knew almost nothing about the native orchids, I suspected that it was an orchid. I bought a "Correll" and studied it. The plants flowered that fall, and I could confirm that we had a common species of *Habenaria*.

Habenaria odontopetala remains common even today, although woods where it can be found are becoming scarce. It continues to flower in our woods late every fall. *Habenaria quinqueseta* was never as frequent, but an occasional plant still appears in our woods. It could more easily be found growing on grassy road embankments of our local, country roads, but no longer — the roads have been widened and paved, and maintained by an over-zealous regimen of herbicides. *Habenaria repens*, although found frequently in much of tropical America, was always a pleasant surprise to find in the roadside ditches of the country road going east to Bee Ridge. Those days are gone because the narrow, old road lined by Washington palms and ditches has now become a concrete, seven-lane racetrack bordered solidly on both sides by condominiums and commercial establishments.

Another member of the orchid community of our woods was *Eulophia alta*. A few plants persisted only a few years after we moved in. I do not know why they moved out. Nevertheless, they were frequent along the old Fruitville and Arcadia roads. Huge colonies of plants, some four to five feet tall, were not uncommon. They were totally eradicated by the county's judiciously applied herbicides. *Eulophia ecristata* also made a rare appearance in our woods forty years ago. It

was frequent in pastures and on some road shoulders just east of town. But no longer — paved roads and housing developments "done 'em in."

Among the most thrilling discoveries during the first cycle of seasons in our new home was *Hexalectris spicata*. My wife even telephoned me at the office to tell me of her latest bonanza. Plants still make their erratic



Polyrhiza lindenii, the rare and seldom seen ghost orchid. Carlyle Luer describes it as resembling "the ghoulish ghost of a frog leaping in midair."

appearance in our yard every year. However, a spectacular concentration of hundreds of plants could be found in the ancient oak and

town. Highway I-75 totally demolished it. For years, we were watching many of the tiny plants on branches in a deserted orange grove in Highland Hammock State Park. Then one visit, we were shocked to find all the plants dead — sprayed with herbicides — to control "parasites!"

Spiranthes vernalis remains common almost everywhere grass will grow along roadsides, but other species, such as *Spiranthes longilabris* and *Spiranthes praecox*, seem to have disappeared completely. The big red *Stenorrhynchus lanceaolatus*, once common on road shoulders of back roads, and even in vacant lots in town, still makes a rare appearance, if we're lucky. [Synonym *Spiranthes lanceolata*, see cover photo. — Ed.] The rare little *Spiranthes polyantha* could be found in the shady humus of a small remnant of a forest on Siesta Key, but houses stole the habitat.

Other species, including those of *Calopogon* and *Platanthera*, once seemingly plentiful in pinewoods and pastures in Sarasota County, have largely disappeared without an obvious cause, unless it be noxious fumes and runoff from excessive numbers of cars and trucks.

In 1929, John Kunkel Small, a botanist well known for his work in the Southeastern U.S., published a small book

titled *From Eden to Sahara, Florida's Tragedy*, describing the ravages on both the native peoples and natural wonders of the state. Seventy years ago, he forecast what has now become a reality. We have witnessed an accelerating destruction for the last forty-four years. I dread to predict what it will be like after the next seventy years.

Welcome to Sahara-sota, Florida. ✨

"We have witnessed an accelerating destruction for the last forty-four years."

cedar forests on Longboat Key. These magnificent forests were later reduced to miles of raw, white sand by a "developer."

The epiphytic *Encyclia tampensis* still occurs in our woods as well as in some of the rare, remaining patches of forest in Sarasota County. Plants were once abundant in oak boughs that made a canopy over the old road through Myakka River State Park. Plants can still be found there, but nothing like the magnificent stands present before the road was widened and trees trimmed and removed so that more visitors could see less.

The minute, epiphytic *Harrisella porrecta*, never found in our woods, used to occur in a beautiful, wet forest just east of

Dr. Carlyle Luer, a retired surgeon, is widely reknowned as an expert on Florida orchids as well as orchids from other parts of the world. Luer is the author of the beautiful but out-of-print book, *The Native Orchids of Florida* (see editor's letter, page 4). Luer is now actively engaged in orchid explorations in South America.